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FARMHOUSE REPAIRS.

By

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This winter representatives of the Department of Agriculture and the Civil Works Administration, canvassed most of the farms in three hundred agricultural counties throughout the country, to find out what is needed to put the dwellings in good liveable condition. The data gives a very complete picture of rural housing conditions, a picture which is discouraging in some ways but pleasing in others. A large proportion of the farmhouses surveyed are structurally sound and their owners deserve to be congratulated on keeping them so in spite of difficulties. Many of these houses are old fashioned but they are well worth remodeling and equipping with modern conveniences. However, there are many houses in bad condition, and many that are wholly unscreened and have little in the way of effective sanitation, lighting or heating. Overcrowding, especially in the newer sections is common. Examples of almost every kind of need are apparent. On the other hand, very encouraging reports are received of low cost improvements made by people in all parts of the country.

Among the needs strongly indicated by the survey are, repairs to roofs, foundations and exterior walls. Some houses needing such repairs are reported in practically all the counties canvassed. The occupants say "We are afraid of losing our farms and cannot afford to spend money on buildings which may pass to others." You can't blame a man for not wanting to spend money on property that he expects to lose, but that kind of policy would never have preserved the Fairbanks house at Dedham, Mass., which was built 298 years ago. It is generally regarded as the oldest house in America, and is still in splendid condition.

Suppose we take a different view. When a roof leaks or a foundation settles, the house usually is damaged much more than the cost of the repair work and if the owner succeeds in holding onto his farm he is the man who will have to bear this loss.

If only a few farmhouses were in need of repairs, the country as a whole would be little concerned. However, there are six million farmhouses with thirty million people or nearly one-fourth of the entire population of the United States living in them. Perhaps one-fourth of these houses are in need of extensive repairs and if they are allowed to go much longer there may be a real shortage of farm dwellings.

Roofs seem to need first attention for leaky roofs invite decay and damage to the whole house. Leaks can often be stopped with a few shingles or a small piece of roofing until more extensive repairs can be afforded. I have seen many farmhouses where the owner has put in just one shingle at a place. Where thirty or forty leaks have been stopped in this way it gives the roof a sort of patched quilt appearance, but it keeps out the rain.

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There are also a great many defective foundations. I venture to say that a good many of these could be made to last a lot longer by taking a shovel and grading around the house to shed rainwater quickly and stop seepage into the ground under the building. A badly settled foundation can sometimes be protected from further damage by jacking it up and temporarily blocking it in place.

Many defective chimneys are reported and these repairs are especially needed because a poor chimney is a dangerous fire risk. Often the chimney can be made reasonably safe at little cost. Leaks around chimneys and doors and windows should also be stopped. If nothing better is available, temporary flashings can be made from asphalt roofing. Loose siding lasts longer if nailed back in place and this also makes the house more comfortable.

I have been talking mostly about the dark side of the picture, but there are many encouraging reports which show how some farmers have been taking advantage of low prices and slack times to remodel or enlarge their houses or build new ones. I am especially interested in a report from Wisconsin about a farmhouse that is being remodeled. This family has been planning the improvements for several years. They are rearranging and refinishing the old part of the house and adding three rooms, and a bathroom and a cellar. The lumber was cut on the farm and stored under cover. After seasoning for two years it is thoroughly dried and ready for use. The cellar walls and a new chimney and fireplace are being constructed of stone hauled by the owner. He is doing a good deal of the work with the aid of a local carpenter and builder. He hopes to get all the improvements made for seven hundred dollars which is much less than it would cost if he had to buy all the material and hire all the labor. Of course, he is fortunate in having seven hundred dollars, but his big advantage is that he planned ahead and secured his material without much cash expense.

Another encouraging thing about the farmhouse situation is the interest that people show and the fine way in which they gave the survey workers the information that was wanted. Everyone seems interested in better farmhouses and many improvements will certainly be made as soon as farmers are a little more sure of their incomes. The Department of Agriculture and the State Colleges are getting together a good deal of material which we think will be helpful. Survey workers in all parts of the country made special reports about recently improved farmhouses and the cost of the work. The best examples are being sorted out, and we expect that they will be published for your use. Plans for well designed houses with convenient kitchens are also being prepared so that they will be available when you want them. You know, of course, that the Department of Agriculture has bulletins on such topics as farm plumbing, water supply, painting, cellar construction, and others. These bulletins can be secured by writing directly to the Department or through your County Agent. Many of the state colleges have similar publications.